

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 27 April 2004
(Morning)

Session 2

£5.00

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

8th Meeting 2004, Session 2

CONVENER

*Cathy Peattie (Falkirk East) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

Margaret Smith (Edinburgh West) (LD)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Shiona Baird (North East Scotland) (Green)

Frances Curran (West of Scotland) (SSP)

*Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab)

Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)

*Mrs Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con)

*Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)

Ms Sandra White (Glasgow) (SNP)

COMMITTEE SUBSTITUTES

Jackie Baillie (Dumbarton) (Lab)

Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)

Carolyn Leckie (Central Scotland) (SSP)

Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING GAVE EVIDENCE:

Rosemary Everett (Scottish Parliament Participation Services)

Ian Macnicol (Scottish Parliament Personnel Office)

Duncan McNeil MSP (Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body)

Levi Pay (Scottish Parliament Corporate Policy Unit)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Steve Farrell

SENIOR ASSISTANT CLERK

Ruth Cooper

ASSISTANT CLERK

Roy McMahon

LOCATION

Chamber

Scottish Parliament Equal Opportunities Committee

Tuesday 27 April 2004

(Morning)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 10:09*]

Item in Private

The Convener (Cathy Peattie): Good morning and welcome to the eighth meeting in 2004 of the Equal Opportunities Committee. I have received apologies from Marilyn Livingstone, Sandra White and Margaret Smith.

Do members agree to take agenda item 4 in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Interests

10:10

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is a declaration of interests. As Sandra White is not here, we must postpone her declaration until the next meeting.

Scottish Parliament Equality Framework

10:10

The Convener: I apologise to our witnesses for the slight delay in starting. I welcome Duncan McNeil from the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body; Rosemary Everett, the head of the Scottish Parliament's participation services; Ian Macnicol, the Scottish Parliament's head of personnel; and Levi Pay, the Scottish Parliament's equalities manager.

The witnesses will be aware that we would like an update on the development of the Scottish Parliament's equality framework. I understand that Duncan McNeil wants to make an opening statement.

Mr Duncan McNeil (Greenock and Inverclyde) (Lab): Good morning. I am grateful to the committee for the opportunity to say something before we deal with questions on the implementation of the SPCB's equal opportunities policy. As I have done previously, I will seek support with answers to any detailed questions from my colleagues Levi Pay, Ian Macnicol and Rosemary Everett, whom the convener has already introduced. I am sure that they will contribute much more than I will.

The SPCB, as an employer of staff in the Parliament and a provider of a wider range of services to the public, is firmly committed to equal opportunities. In September last year, we gave evidence to the committee and updated it on progress on the implementation of our equality framework. Since then, we have carried out a great deal of additional work in the area. I thought that I would highlight some of that work as a brief introduction.

If we had to sum up the current phase of our equal opportunities work in one word, that word would be "monitoring". No organisation can ever sit back and think that it has done everything that it needs to do to be an equal opportunities employer and service provider—in fact, if an organisation was under that impression, I would suspect that there was probably a problem somewhere. That is why, since we previously met the committee, we have delivered a range of projects in order to take stock of our performance so far and to identify areas on which we still need to focus in the future.

One such project has involved the production of the first annual directors' equality reports. In January this year, each director produced a report that set out what their directorate had achieved in 2003 in relation to accessibility and equality issues. Those reports were brought together and

published as the report that members have in front of them today—the “Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body (SPCB) Equal Opportunities Report 2003”. The project has been extremely valuable and has enabled the different parts of our organisation to share information about good practice. We have sent copies of the report to a range of external organisations to inform them about what the SPCB is doing. We intend to produce such reports annually.

We have also carried out a major piece of work with our equal opportunities staff audit, which is a detailed survey of all our staff. We carried out the audit for the first time in 2003 and intend to carry out future audits every two years. The audit provides us with a snapshot of the composition of our work force, information about which is included in the SPCB’s equal opportunities report 2003. Perhaps more important, the project analyses the experiences and views of staff in order to assess whether people are being treated fairly and equally.

Most of the information in the audit is extremely positive. However, in order to ensure that we respond effectively to all the findings, the data from the audit are currently being considered in detail by our senior management team. The main purpose of the audit is to ensure that we take full account of the diversity of our work force when developing our employment procedures and policies. However, it is also likely that we will wish to publish the audit report—we will certainly keep the committee informed of progress in that respect. As a result of the sensitive nature of some of the information that the audit contains, we will publish it only if we are sure that no individuals can be identified from the findings. We are also in the process of completing an equal pay audit, which is providing a detailed gender analysis of our work force and information about all elements of pay to ensure that no forms of pay discrimination are emerging.

10:15

In addition to monitoring our progress, since we previously met the committee we have delivered a range of other projects that are aimed at improving access to the Parliament. We have produced extremely useful fact sheets for MSPs and their staff on complying with the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 and we delivered our own successful disability awareness week. We ran a pilot for four weeks in February and March to provide British Sign Language interpreters for question time. In looking ahead to our opening of the new building this year, we are also developing a range of publications and guides to ensure that people have the information that they need about the building in a range of languages and formats.

Those are just a few of the items that are discussed in more detail in our 2003 report. We welcome comments from members on such issues or on any other issues.

The Convener: Thank you very much. Elaine Smith will ask the first questions.

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab): I thank the convener for letting me ask questions first because, as members know, I must give evidence to the Finance Committee and must leave soon.

I thank Duncan McNeil for his opening statement; the corporate body’s commitment to equal opportunities is commendable. He may not be surprised to learn that I want to ask about the crèche in the new Parliament building.

It was understood some time ago that there would not be enough room for a nursery in the new building—whether that was the appropriate place to have a nursery was another issue. I have received a letter from George Reid in response to a letter that I sent him, which outlines matters. The SPCB proposed a voucher scheme, to which I will perhaps return later.

In his letter, George Reid said:

“I should emphasise that there has always been an understanding that members and staff will be able to use the crèche within prescribed limits.”

Before I came to the Parliament, I assumed that a crèche would have been one of the first things that a family-friendly Parliament would want to implement. I certainly welcome the fact that visitors will be able to use the crèche, particularly as I called for that in my first speech in the Parliament, but we must also consider breaking down barriers for MSPs and their staff. We already do that with, for example, rent for accommodation in Edinburgh and the payment of mortgage interest and travel for MSPs. We pay attention to things such as our cars, but we should also pay attention to our children and how we can break down barriers in that regard.

I know that the crèche will be available in some circumstances, but what are those circumstances? Will the matter be reviewed? Do you envisage that access to the crèche will be more widely open to MSPs and their staff in the future?

Mr McNeil: Your questions are not a surprise, as you have taken a keen interest in the matter for a long time, rather than simply as a result of the advent of the new Holyrood Parliament building.

You rightly say that a number of support mechanisms are already in place for staff, the public and so on. You mentioned vouchers, but there are also flexible working and job-share schemes—I could go on and on. Support includes

dispensation in respect of accommodation allowances for MSPs when a child is young, for breastfeeding and so on. There is a full range of mechanisms.

The crèche is on the other side of the matter. You rightly point out that there has been a decision to establish a crèche for some time and that many issues have been involved, including the impossibility of providing anything larger within the Holyrood building project.

A lot of work has gone into establishing the crèche and into trying to establish the possible level of its use. We are confident that what we have in place now reflects the estimated need at this point, but it is a moveable feast—there is no doubt about that—and the situation will be monitored. If demand increases, we expect that the corporate body will meet that demand but, as George Reid and others have pointed out and as agreed by the corporate body, the crèche is primarily a resource for the public to allow them to engage with the Parliament and democracy. Obviously, if it was being underused, it would be nonsense for us not to allow staff and MSPs to use it in emergencies, so we envisage that we will be able to provide limited crèche facilities to members of staff and MSPs.

Elaine Smith: There was press speculation that staff and MSPs would not be able to use the crèche at all. I would have questioned the rationale behind such a decision, but you have made it clear that they will be able use it in certain circumstances. How will that work? Will places be bookable?

Comment has also been made about whether the crèche should be a free service for MSPs, although, of course, it does not have to be. Was any consideration given to MSPs or, indeed, staff making some payment for the use of the crèche?

Mr McNeil: It would be first come, first served. We cannot plan for any given day. If events such as the recent nursery nurses' lobby were to create a large demand for crèche places, we would be hard pushed to allow the women involved in such a lobby to engage in the democratic process in the Parliament and to provide them with crèche facilities. For us—I am sure that most MSPs, if not everyone, would agree—the crèche is primarily a public resource, and the public should not be denied crèche places due to in-house demands.

We do not expect a note from mum; the crèche will not operate on that basis. Use will be monitored, but we will not ask people to justify their need for a place by giving us three pages of written explanation of what the emergency is—there is no prospect of that at all. Staff and members will get on to us and, when places are

available for emergencies, we will be happy to accommodate their need.

Elaine Smith: I point out that, having called for the public to be able to access the crèche, I am happy that they will be able to do so, but I rather thought that the public would access it as well as the people who work in the complex: the staff and the MSPs. I thought that the crèche would exist primarily for staff and MSPs, but that the public would also be able to access it, so I put my concerns about that on the record.

You used the word “monitoring” in your opening statement. I take it that you will monitor the crèche provision, because a lot of the research that was done for the crèche may have been done some time ago, and circumstances change. For example, Parliament has a different make-up now and might have a different one again in future.

Will you also give me an update on the voucher system? On the previous occasion that you all appeared before the committee, there had been an oversight in adjusting the vouchers.

Mr McNeil: The vouchers have been brought into line with inflation and have been updated. Rosemary Everett and Ian Macnicol might want to say something on the voucher system, if that would be helpful.

Elaine Smith: It would, but I will therefore ask something further. With the voucher system, the Parliament is leading the way and showing other employers how a good equal opportunities employer can operate. Do you have any information on how the vouchers compare to other organisations' provision?

Mr McNeil: I think that we have, and we compare favourably. The strength of the voucher system is that it benefits staff across the board, from Greenock to Edinburgh and from Dundee to wherever. All staff can benefit from the system, and we are pleased with that. Ian Macnicol will be able to fill in some of the detail on the scheme.

Rosemary Everett (Scottish Parliament Participation Services): We have just revisited the visitor management strategy and report, which predict visitor numbers for the new Parliament building. That process includes reconsidering the level of demand for the crèche, so we are monitoring the service even before we introduce it. We are ensuring that the level of service that we will have when we start is in line with visitor and internal demand and we are confident that we have reached that state.

As part of good contract management, once the crèche is introduced, a full system of performance indicators will be in place, and that will enable us to monitor uptake of the crèche facilities. As you probably know, we have opted for a start-up level

of service that will deliver best value for money from the external contract that we have let, but there is room within that to expand the service if demand exceeds our predictions and there is physical capacity to do that within the space. Monitoring will therefore be a key part of what we do in the first six to 12 months of operation, after which, as Duncan McNeil said, the SPCB will be able to review the decision on the level of service that we offer.

Ian Macnicol (Scottish Parliament Personnel Office): Before we introduced the vouchers in 2002, the range with which we compared our proposal was between £25 and £45 for a pre-school child, and the corporate body took the view that it should set its vouchers at the higher end of that range. We therefore started off with £40 for a pre-school child, although we have since agreed to uprate that in line with the retail prices index. That is what we will do, in line with all other allowances; it will simply roll forward. At some point in future, we will probably want to benchmark the vouchers again. That work is not planned at the moment, but it will probably be put into place at a later date.

Elaine Smith: I have a final question, which is on the make-up of the corporate body. I do not know whether Duncan McNeil will be able to answer it—perhaps the committee could discuss it later or write to the SPCB about it. The SPCB is the body in charge of equal opportunities for staff on behalf of the Parliament, but is there gender balance on it? I do not know how much you can comment on that.

Mr McNeil: The current lack of gender balance, at least in relation to the SPCB members elected by the Parliament, is obvious—as it is this morning on the Equal Opportunities Committee. Perhaps the committee should consider the much broader issue of whether gender balance should be built into membership of the committees and, of course, the corporate body.

The Convener: You noted that all the members of the Equal Opportunities Committee are female. Although that makes for a comfortable working relationship, we are all aware that the committee should have some male members and we feel a bit frustrated with an all-female committee.

I will ask some questions on the equal opportunities staff audit, which took place in summer 2003. Will you explain the work that was involved between then and the publication of the results? You talked about some of the key findings; will you tell us what has been omitted and why?

Mr McNeil: The equal opportunities staff audit sought, as I understand, two types of information—I hope that Levi Pay will fill in the

detail. It sought monitoring data about the composition of the work force. Those data have already been published and are in the annex of the equal opportunities report 2003. It also sought more detailed information about the staffs views and experience. For example, we asked for their views on the training that they received and on the implementation of equalities policies. That type of information leads to the audit being more sensitive, and I have been told that it would be possible to identify some individuals if we were to publish the raw data. We plan to publish the findings that are not yet published—providing that, as I said earlier, we are comfortable that the report does not identify any individual members of staff—and we are anxious to keep the committee informed of that process.

Levi Pay and Ian Macnicol were involved in the staff audit and will be more useful at providing the detail.

Levi Pay (Scottish Parliament Corporate Policy Unit): On the process, the audit has been quite a large project. We distributed questionnaires to all members of staff and then chased non-respondents to maximise the response rate. We were happy to have a final response rate of 87 per cent, which makes the findings highly valid.

After that, we responded to some of the quick wins by introducing a disability awareness week and through our application to become a disability symbol user, which came about as a result of the findings on representation. We published the findings on the representation of groups in our work force as an annex to the SPCB equal opportunities report 2003. The process is ongoing.

In response to the audit findings, we intend to produce an action plan, which the senior management team will consider in detail later next month. When the action plan is in place, we propose to publish the report along with the action plan. It makes sense to set the plan in the context of our achievements since the audit was carried out and our plans to continue to achieve in the future.

10:30

The Convener: Are there any issues that cause particular concern? If so, have any attempts been made to address them?

Levi Pay: One of the key issues is under-representation of certain groups. For example, the audit highlighted the slight under-representation of visible ethnic minority staff and disabled staff within the organisation. A lot of work has been done on that issue since the audit was carried out. We plan to have a presence at various targeted

job fairs and we distribute information about job opportunities to a range of community groups and networks. We are making a conscious effort to tackle issues that were highlighted in the findings.

The Convener: Will you monitor your success? It is important that you raise the game and ensure that the Parliament is represented at job fairs and so on, but it is also important that the success of those measures is monitored.

Levi Pay: Different monitoring mechanisms exist. There is on-going recruitment monitoring: each time we advertise a post and recruit, we issue monitoring forms with the application forms. We intend to carry out an equal opportunities staff audit every two years and we now have baseline data that we can use for comparison in future audits.

Shiona Baird (North East Scotland) (Green): The report mentions that 45 per cent of the staff who replied to the survey are women. You are pleased that that means that the SPCB employs a good proportion of women, but will you examine the type of jobs that women have, which is an important issue?

Ian Macnicol: That information will emerge from the equal pay audit, but I can say that women are well represented throughout the grades.

Marlyn Glen (North East Scotland) (Lab): In previous evidence to the committee, Levi Pay mentioned that a mystery-shopper exercise was being considered to assess how well different groups can access the Parliament's information and services. Has such an exercise been carried out and, if so, what were the results?

Levi Pay: The exercise has not yet been carried out mainly because it would not, given that it would probably focus on physical access issues, be helpful to carry it out in our interim accommodation. Many learning points have already been picked up in our planning for the new building. The right time to carry out the exercise and to address any gaps will be when we have moved and settled into the new building.

Marlyn Glen: Do you have a plan in place to do that exercise when we move?

Levi Pay: The move will be an excellent opportunity for us to assess gaps. We do not yet have a timescale for the project, but we certainly intend to consider the matter.

Marlyn Glen: Paragraph 5.4 in section 5 of the equal opportunities report for 2003 mentions feedback from the public on the quality of services. What key messages have you extracted from that feedback? Are there weaknesses that we need to address?

Levi Pay: One key issue on which we have monitored service-user feedback is the impact of our language policy. In the past 12 months, we have been particularly active in extending our equal opportunities work on that issue. We have produced a range of publications in ethnic minority languages and we have monitored uptake of them. We monitor the number of downloads of publications from our website and the number of requests that we receive for copies of leaflets in languages other than English. As I said previously, it is all very well for us to send out a certain number of copies to organisations, but the crucial question is whether people request them. We are pleased to say that the publications are extremely popular. We have had requests for more than 5,000 copies of the "Making your voice heard in the Scottish Parliament" leaflet in languages other than English or in particular formats, which is an unexpected level of demand. The difficult thing about providing information in other languages is that one never knows what the demand will be until a publication is rolled out and uptake is monitored.

We always seek feedback when we run events or provide services and we ensure that we use that feedback to improve the services that we offer. For example, when we sent out copies of the British Sign Language video that we produced, we sought the views of deaf people's organisations to allow us to feed them back into future publications and productions.

Marlyn Glen: Section 5 of the equal opportunities report for 2003 mentions a research project on public attitudes to the Parliament, the results of which were to be known early in 2004. Do we have those results and, if so, how will the information be published?

Rosemary Everett: We have the results. Members may be aware that the report was leaked to the newspapers recently. We will take the report to the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body later this morning. After the SPCB has considered the report, we will ask it to decide, among other things, how the results will be published.

Marlyn Glen: Levi Pay mentioned good uptake of leaflets in languages other than English. The SPCB equal opportunities report stresses the popularity of such publications. Do we receive many requests for translation of leaflets into languages in which we do not currently publish?

Rosemary Everett: We do not have exact figures for that. We often receive such requests from visitors, either through the external liaison unit, which deals with VIP-type visits, or through more general tourist visits. We translate material on demand—for example into Japanese or Russian—and we publish it on our website, if that

is more effective than committing to a print run. A big step change in monitoring will come in visitor management for Holyrood. We will introduce more effective methods of receiving feedback and monitoring uptake in time for the move to Holyrood, which means that we should be able to answer the questions more fully in the future.

Marlyn Glen: Have you reviewed the Parliament's race equality scheme and has a new action plan been produced?

Levi Pay: Not yet. Under our statutory obligations, we must review various aspects of the scheme within three years of its production. That deadline is approaching. Rather than produce another race equality scheme, we will look ahead to the draft Disability Discrimination Bill that is likely to be introduced at Westminster. If that bill becomes legislation, we will have duties to produce a disability equality scheme. We intend to pre-empt that and to produce a general equality scheme that deals with all the strands, rather than produce just a race equality scheme. A general scheme will be less time specific and will be more likely to last. We will do that work during the coming year as we approach the deadline for the review.

Mrs Nanette Milne (North East Scotland) (Con): I have questions about access to the Parliament for those who are deaf and hard of hearing. In previous evidence, you mentioned the facility to employ signers for meetings and the extent to which audio loop systems are used by deaf and hard of hearing people. You said that it is important that facilities are not tokenistic and that we must get best value from them and use them to widen access. Do you have figures for uptake by staff or MSPs of the facility to employ BSL signers, and for how many people benefit from the availability of sound amplification systems?

Levi Pay: I do not have those figures with me but, as the contract manager for that contract, I have access to the figures and can provide them. Uptake has increased since we issued more detailed guidance to members and parliamentary staff on how to book sign language interpreters. I will provide more detail of that increase. The BSL pilot was an opportunity for us to make use of signers and to publicise our on-demand interpreting service.

Mrs Milne: I also wanted to ask about the pilot. Are the results available and, if so, what service is likely to be offered after we have moved to Holyrood? Have you received feedback on the general policy of providing BSL interpreters on demand? If so, are you content that the policy will adequately serve the needs of the users who will access the Parliament?

Mr McNeil: Extensive dialogue has been undertaken with that network and the deaf and hard of hearing community, which have greatly influenced what is in place at the moment. We have seen the innovation of the BSL signers at First Minister's question time and around the Parliament and we hope to continue to provide that service. Obviously, by doing so, we are reaching out to all of that community. As the member knows, visual aids have also been used, including videos that can be taken out to the community. Quite a lot of work is being done in that regard, in liaison with Levi Pay and others in the Parliament.

As the report mentioned, there are also the design changes that have taken place in the new Holyrood building—I am thinking of the space that has been reserved for people with disabilities, the crèche facility, loop sound enhancement and the mega-loos that take people and their carers. Those are the kind of things that will make the whole Holyrood campus accessible.

Although a lot of work is being done, there is still a lot more to do and we cannot become complacent on the issue. Much of the work that Levi Pay and others do is about liaison with the various networks that impact on the issues. We are also in a position in which we are setting standards. Others are now approaching us to ask what we are doing and they are using that as a benchmark. As I said, we are not complacent; we hope that a lot of the work that is going on will meet the approval of the committee.

Mrs Milne: One of my constituents raised an issue with me recently. I am not sure whether we are doing anything to address this sort of problem. My constituent is a severe dyslexic—not deaf or blind, but word blind and very badly so—who commented on the fact that in local or national Government offices it is very difficult to access information that is not in written form. As we know, there are forms for this and that and we are always being given leaflets to read. Has consideration been given to putting information on the Parliament's website using voice-overs or whatever, which could be accessed instead of the printed word? I had not thought about the issue before it was raised with me but, having done so, I think that severe dyslexics have significant problems in accessing the sort of information that the Parliament, as an equal opportunities organisation, would be expected to provide. Has anything been done in that regard or has thought been given to how we will address the issue?

Mr McNeil: Levi Pay will respond on the severity of the problem. Obviously, there are guidelines that encourage Parliament to take a lead. They ensure that any written materials that are issued are demystified and that they are put in simple

language that is easily understood by a broad range of people. Obviously, at the end of the spectrum to which the member referred, additional difficulties are involved, which we could and should consider. I am not sure whether any work has been done, but Levi Pay can answer that aspect of the question.

Levi Pay: I agree that the first thing to do is to get the written materials right. A lot can be done to simplify the information that we provide in written form. The "Making your voice heard in the Scottish Parliament" leaflet was successful purely because we put a lot of work into ensuring that the information was set at exactly the right level for people to engage with. That work will continue as we produce a range of publications for Holyrood.

Beyond that, I can say that we produce information on audio tape on demand and, in the case of certain publications, in advance. That is useful not only for people who are blind or who have visual impairments but for people with dyslexia or other learning difficulties.

The on-going redesign of our website offers a valuable opportunity to examine provision of information in video and other forms. I know that work is on-going with members of the Parliament to consider whether they would like to have a short video in which they would introduce themselves and so on. That is the sort of provision that can bridge many of the gaps to which the member referred.

Mrs Milne: That would be very useful. This organisation could set an example that could be followed by local councils and other organisations that people need to be able to access directly.

The Convener: Before we move on, I have a question about availability of signers. Increasingly, members tell us that it is difficult to get signers these days. There is also an issue about training signers. Although you might not be able to answer that part of the question, I would be interested to know how easy it is to access signers. How long do members who want to have a signer do some work in their constituency, for example, have to wait before a signer is available?

10:45

Mr McNeil: We are committed to looking at the issue and to identifying how many members are taking up the provision. We will provide the committee with a report on the subject. I am not sure whether we have the detail with us at committee today.

Levi Pay: We do not have information about usage, but there is a clear problem about availability of signers. There are between 40 and 50 qualified interpreters in Scotland, of whom

about 20 are employed on full-time projects. That means that only about 20 signers—not many—are available at any given time to cover the whole of Scotland.

We take the availability of signers into account when we consider provision of signers for First Minister's question time, for example. We considered offering signers for all debates all the time, but the problem with that level of provision is that we would have used up a valuable resource to quite a large extent because we would have needed two or three signers for the whole of Wednesday afternoon and the whole of Thursday. Given the likely demand, we thought that that would deplete the resource in Scotland to too great an extent. In that sense, we have taken into account the short supply of signers.

If members or parliamentary staff indicate that they require the service about two weeks in advance—or even 10 days in advance—normally we have no problem in locating provision. A problem arises if and when members or parliamentary staff expect us to find a signer at two days' notice. In that situation, we often have to say that we simply cannot provide that. As a result, meetings have to be rescheduled and so on. The clear message is that the further in advance we plan such events and make those decisions, the better.

The Convener: Mainstreaming equalities should, however, mean that people who need BSL signers should have them when they require them.

Levi Pay: That is right, but in a sense every organisation—including Parliament—operates in a wider context. If there are problems outside the organisation, it means that there are limitations to what we can do.

Shiona Baird: My questions relate to training of MSPs and their staff. Has any work been undertaken at SPCB level to identify the training requirements of MSP staff? If so, what plans are in place to assist in meeting those requirements?

Mr McNeil: That is the ultimate challenge. The short answer to the question about whether the SPCB has undertaken an analysis of the needs of individual MSP employees is, "No". That said, a lot of support is in place in terms of guidance, induction information and so forth that assists MSP staff to deal with some of the issues that they face. As I said, no needs assessment of MSP staff has been carried out and I am not aware of any plans to do so.

Shiona Baird: Do you monitor the number of MSP staff who attend the training that is provided by the Parliament?

Mr McNeil: I can get back to the member with details of that. There is limited access to the

training that is provided by the Parliament. That said, as the training is provided on a needs assessment of the Parliament's employees, it suits parliamentary staff and might not be transferable to MSP staff. MSP staff can and do access some of the courses that are provided. The issue is one that we could look into further.

Shiona Baird: My last question is probably my most important one. During a previous evidence-taking session, you mentioned the need to consider how to raise among MSPs awareness that they have clear equal opportunities responsibilities as employers and as providers of services. What have you done to progress that issue?

Mr McNeil: There is a lot in place. Obviously, there is quite extensive employment guidance that sets out how we should select, interview and treat our staff. There is also direct support from the personnel office. Other schemes are in place to provide support—the names of which have escaped me for the moment.

Obviously, we have got guidelines in the fact sheets that have been produced in the run-up to the implementation of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. They are a good example of the sort of practical guidance that is needed. They will engage staff in outlying offices, raise their awareness and demand that they think about barriers to access in their surroundings. All of that not only raises awareness but has increased the demand on various budgets. Only recently, the SPCB agreed to fund the cost of professional audits of access to constituency offices. We also have a role to play in situations involving architects' fees for the reasonable redesign of offices to make them more accessible. There is not only greater awareness, but, over the past year, there has been action, support and innovation.

Ian Macnicol: I do not have anything to add to what Duncan McNeil has said. On training, we have only one course that is designed for MSPs' staff, which is the induction course—it touches on equalities matters. As we roll out that course more generally, we will monitor uptake and publish more information about it. Other training that we provide is generally in relation to making the best use of services that the SPCB provides to members. The SPCB has not signed on to deliver specific job-related training, on the basis that the employer is best placed to determine what his or her employees need to be trained in to enable them to do their jobs well.

Shiona Baird: I am interested in building equalities into procurement work. I know that you have not had much experience of that, but how effective has that been so far? Furthermore, how

has it been received by those who are looking for contracts?

Levi Pay: You are right to note that we are at an early stage. The project was introduced only last year.

The impact has been positive. Indeed, the Commission for Racial Equality included our project in its procurement guide as an example of good practice. Equality issues feature much more readily now in specifications. We see best value, in the context of procurement, as including equalities and access issues, which means that the quality of the services or products that we are purchasing is dependent, to a large extent, on how accessible the service is and how non-discriminatory the delivery of a particular product or service will be.

One of the fears that surround projects such as ours is that people might be put off by the burdensome nature of the requirements that we put on them in the tender documentation. Although we have not had feedback on that, we drafted the requirements with that concern in mind. When we ask about a particular access or equality requirement, we are building that into the nature of the product or service that we are procuring. We are deliberately not viewing this as an opportunity to have someone go away and draft reams and reams of paperwork for us. In that regard, I would say that we have prepared well for the needs of potential contractors.

That said, the issue will be kept under review. For example, the procurement office is considering widening the project to include broader social responsibility issues instead of simply equalities issues. That gives us an opportunity to move along that line. We will consider whether to review our requirements in response to feedback from various contractors and other stakeholders. We operate a system in which we open up a dialogue with our potential suppliers. The meet-the-buyer conference that is organised by our procurement office is an example of how we try constantly to reach out to small and medium-sized enterprises. As part of that, we will want to get a feel for how easy they find it to meet the equalities requirements.

The Convener: In section 5 of your report, you mention that some issues were highlighted around bullying and harassment. Could you expand on that? Is there a problem? If so, what is being done about it?

Mr McNeil: There may be a problem and, if there is, we need to establish the extent of the problem. Work is in progress on that issue so that we can include it in our framework. I do not think that the work that is under way needs to go to the SPCB.

Levi Pay: It might have to go the SPCB for information. On bullying and harassment, any employer has constantly to seek feedback from staff because it is otherwise difficult to know whether a problem exists. The audit included the issue and we have included it in the report as an example of the areas that were covered. We also examined training, career development and appraisal markings across the board. Our aim was to find out whether particular groups of staff are disadvantaged somehow by our procedures, or feel less satisfied with the SPCB as an employer. The appropriate context in which to consider those issues in detail will be when we have published the report and the action plans. That will enable us to progress the matter strategically, rather than force us to cherry pick particular issues at this stage.

The Convener: What is the current situation with regard to the proposed network of dignity-at-work contacts? How will that operate and why do you feel that the system is necessary?

Levi Pay: Such a system has always been envisaged. It was part of the original equality framework action plan that was devised some time ago. It is the one significant project from that action plan that is still outstanding.

Again, such a system is necessary in any organisation. It is not indicative of a particular problem; rather, it is part and parcel of ensuring that adequate support mechanisms are available to members of staff who face bullying and harassment, without presuming that anyone faces such things. That is why we operate our counselling and welfare services and why we will roll out the network of contacts that you mentioned. The contacts will act as a first point of reference for anyone who wants to know more about our bullying and harassment procedures or who wants advice on how to proceed with a particular complaint as there are various ways in which complaints can be raised. Our aim is to ensure that the people who fulfil that role have adequate and specialist training.

The Convener: I thank our witnesses for their attendance. The committee will reflect on what you have said and might write to you on a number of other issues.

Before we move into private session, I should say that Frances Curran has contacted us with her apologies.

10:57

Meeting continued in private until 11:14.

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